

The Easy Road
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Chapter 1

Glynda's head throbbed. After completing the panel on stage performances at the Philadelphia Country Club in suburban Philly, the post-music conference schmoozing had not suited her mood. So, she had driven down Lancaster Avenue, looking for live music. She spotted a small neon sign that said Scott's Café. The stand-up sign, readable only from the parking lot, announced open mic night. Glynda knew such events could mean a headache, but someone told her Scott had an ear for talent. A small bar like this, outside of the city, was just the kind of place she was famous for finding a diamond in the rough.

These performances were too rough, though. She had sat through several acts of people banging into the microphone stand thirty or forty times before wailing painful, illogical memories against the tedious strumming of guitar chords. Her headache signaled it was time to leave when something made her glance around the room. The six people mingling around had turned into ten. The backs of her arms tingled: something was brewing.

In less than two minutes there were easily fifteen people and more were still coming. Within five minutes almost thirty people were pushing into the small room. Glynda's leg was shaking, caught in the anticipation of the crowd.

The cheap house lights went out with a thud. One blue and one red light alternated across the stage as applause rolled through the room. "This is what you came for," the announcer called over the mounting cheers. "Thursday nights at Scott's Café. It's our own . . ." The clapping got louder and people started to stomp their feet. "Richard Austin!"

The spotlight found him, moving through the crowd, his guitar case in one hand, shaking hands with the other. The applause was almost overwhelming in the small room. Richard didn't seem phased as he nodded and smiled, making contact with everyone in the room. In the split second connection, when his eyes met Glynda's, she saw a light, like a spotlight inside him. She couldn't wait to hear him play!

He pulled the guitar out of the case, plugged it in without feedback and sat gracefully on the stool in front of the microphone, the bottom of the guitar easily balanced on his thigh. "I appreciate your enthusiasm," he said. "You're too kind." The cheers rose again as Richard settled the guitar on his lap. Waiting for the quiet to return, he adjusted the microphone, keeping the guitar clutched under his arm, a pick in his mouth. He removed the pick before he spoke. "Thanks for coming out to Scott's Café," he said, to calm the clapping. "We hope you don't drink too much, but please be generous with the waitresses. I'd like to play a song I just wrote. It's called, 'Restless.'"

The room was silent as Richard embraced the guitar with confidence and played it like a familiar lover. Glynda could tell, by their sound, the strings were new. Richard's voice rang clear and full. He took good care of his instruments. His eyes sparkled, singing to each person as if they were in his living room. The song spoke of a longing inside he couldn't reach, couldn't name. She liked the intimacy of the lyrics. He had the sense of rhythm to provide a beat with his foot, against the floor or the stool and the crowd was rocking in time to the music. It was a song they'd never heard. As she imagined what he would sound like with a full band, her toes curled in excitement. Then she felt the prickle behind her knee. All the signs were there. Glynda Jasper had made yet another amazing find.

When he finished and bowed, waiting for the applause to die down, he laid his guitar in the case and stood, smiling and bowing. The cheers got louder and the foot stomping began. "You're awesome," he finally shouted. "Thanks!" Richard bent down for the guitar and brought it into his lap, as he returned to the microphone, the light from his face on again. "This is called 'Bells On'." The crowd cheered and sang with him like an anthem. It was a song about greeting every day with joy.

When the song was complete and the house lights came on, Glynda felt like her lover had risen from bed and left before she climaxed. It was an exhilarating performance, but she needed to know more about him. How could she have missed someone this good?

Glynda watched as he wound cables and talked with a steady stream of people. Richard was a handsome man, well-built, of medium height. His hair was sandy brown and hung in loose curls just tickling his collar. With those sparkling eyes against the ruddy good looks he could easily be appealing to women. Glynda was pleased to see there were an equal number of men eager to talk to him. She liked the way Richard smiled, said a few words, looking straight at each person, shaking their hands with interest.

When the last person left, she went up to him. "I'm Glynda Jasper. I really liked the songs you played tonight."

"Thanks, Glynda. I'm Richard Austin." He cupped both hands around hers as he shook her hand. She could feel the performance energy still coursing through him. He looked directly at her. His eyes were blue with white specks, like stars in the evening sky. The light was emanating from them. "Thanks so much for hanging around to hear me play." His smile was as fresh as it had been for the first person.

"It was a very good performance, Richard."

"Thanks." He nodded his head and scanned the room around her. "Would you like to have a drink with me?"

"I'd like that." Glynda was glad he had initiated the continuation of the discussion.

"Hey, Scott, could I get a G & T? And the lady will have . . ." He turned to her.

"Seltzer and Lime," she said to Scott.

Richard pointed to a booth. "How long have you been playing, Richard?" she asked as they both took their seats across from each other.

He shrugged. "Most of my life, I guess."

"Could I have seen you perform elsewhere?"

"I don't think so," Richard said. "I haven't performed much since college. Scott's an old friend. He lets me play Thursday nights when I have a new song. It's usually just one song, maybe a second, like tonight." He looked longingly at the stage. "The crowd was great, tonight."

"So, you're a songwriter," she said.

"Not professionally." Richard laughed. "Every once in a while I have a song that needs to come out. I'm a CPA."

A CPA, Glynda thought. That must explain why she hadn't heard of him. The song about restlessness made more sense now. She was curious if he had a family to go along with that job. "Did your wife come to hear you play tonight, Mr. Austin?"

"I'm not married." The look in his eyes was penetrating. "Call me Richard." He smiled. Well, at least he was single, Glynda thought. A career and a wife might be too hard to deal with.

Richard settled back in the booth. "So, Glynda, what brings a sophisticated and beautiful woman like you to a little café in Rosemont?" He seemed quite at ease in this flirtatious role. Glynda felt a stirring in her belly she was not comfortable with. But, this cockiness would serve him well. And if her 43-year-old body appealed to him, it might give her more control over his career.

"I like to hear live music," she said to keep the discussion of her short.

His eyes were shining as they engaged hers at every turn. "A music fan, huh?"

"I'd say so," she said. If he only knew how much music meant to her. And the people who created it. But it was time to get the focus back on him. "You enjoy performing, don't you, Richard?"

"It's a lot of fun." His face was lit. "It always seems to rejuvenate me," he said. That's exactly what she wanted to hear.

"Richard, how many songs have you written?"

He took a sip of his drink before he answered. "I don't know. Hundreds, maybe."

"Are they all as good as the ones you played tonight?"

"I think so," he said, smiling broadly. "But I'm no expert." All she could think about was how much she wanted to see him on a bigger stage.

"Have you recorded any of them?" she asked.

"I've never even been in a recording studio. I never had a need to."

Glynda's stomach sank. Inexperience in the studio could be a problem, but not one that couldn't be remedied. "How long have you been an accountant, Richard?"

"This year will be ten years." His eyes grabbed hers and insisted they remain with him. It made her face flush. He had to be in his thirties, she thought. A little old. All the more reason not to lose any more time. Richard Austin needed to be a star. It was time now. Her knee reminded her, as if she didn't know, that this was the right thing to do. As she prepared her line, Richard gave her an uneasy smile and spoke, "What is this, a job interview?" he asked.

Glynda relaxed her breathing and pulled herself to the table, leaning on her forearms, her hands clasped in front of her. This was always her favorite part.

"Richard, how would you like to be a rock star?"

Richard swayed and drummed his fingers on the table. Then he mirrored her position. "I must be losing my touch." He shook his head. "I knew you wanted me." He sank back into the booth and sighed. "But I see you've got another kind of use in mind." His eyebrow went up and Glynda noticed his face had grown dark and serious, his forehead creased with lines. "I'm sorry, Ms. Jasper, but I was offered a record contract when I was in college. I wasn't interested then, and over the years, I've invested my energies in other endeavors. Music is just something I do for fun. I've built a satisfying life for myself and I'm not interested in a risky career in music." The warm, charming man was gone.